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Bush OKs bill to tighten up air security Screening all checked baggage may increase delays for travelers

[Zachary Coile, Chronicle Washington Bureau](#)

Tuesday, November 20, 2001

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URL: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2001/11/20/MN137229.DTL>



Washington -- Hoping to ease the anxieties of passengers before the Thanksgiving holiday, President Bush signed a much-anticipated bill yesterday that will put government screeners at airports and more armed air marshals aboard planes.

"Today, we take permanent and aggressive steps to improve the security of our airways," Bush said at a signing ceremony at Reagan National Airport.

The measure, which was approved by the Congress last week, requires that programs to inspect all checked luggage be put in place within 60 days. Within a year, the job of screening passengers and bags will be turned over to 28,000 new federal employees.

But the security measures could also add to the vexing delays travelers have been experiencing since Sept. 11.

As federal supervisors are put in charge of airport screening stations, passengers can expect to encounter more hand searches of carry-on bags and more pat-downs using hand wands. Travelers may also face delays as their names are cross-checked on FBI watch lists, part of a new effort to increase background checks of passengers.

More law enforcement officers will also be visible around the airport. At least one officer must be posted at every screening station.

For airports, the new law could prove a logistical nightmare during the yearlong transition phase as they end contracts with private security firms that oversee screening and replace them with new uniformed federal employees.

Many of the private screeners are expected to apply for federal jobs, which have a starting salary of \$31,000 -- about twice what some of the private guards now earn. However, about a quarter of current employees won't be eligible for the new jobs because they are not U.S. citizens.

The law requires that airports install bomb-detection machines within a year and start screening all checked luggage within 60 days. Currently only about 10 percent of checked luggage is screened.

But Douglas R. Laird, an aviation security consultant and former director of security for Northwest Airlines, said only two U.S. companies make the \$1 million bomb detection machines, and they will

have a hard time producing enough machines for every airport in a year. Laird said it will cost airports several million dollars more to actually install the machines in their complicated electronic baggage systems.

"At first blush, it sounds really good to say we're going to have 100 percent screening of checked luggage" within a year, Laird said, "but in reality, I don't think it's going to work out."

Sen. Barbara Boxer, at a press conference in San Francisco yesterday, said she is urging Bush and Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta to speed up implementation of the law and start screening 100 percent of checked bags immediately "by machine, manually, or by bomb sniffing dogs."

"It doesn't take that much training to teach people to pat for bomb parts," the California Democrat said. "What I'm trying to do is push harder for the safety of the system."

Many airlines have already taken steps to reinforce cockpit doors, but the measure provides federal money for other measures, such as installing video cameras so pilots can see any security problems in passenger compartments. The law also authorizes qualified pilots to carry firearms in the cockpit.

Passengers will foot the bill for the new security costs with a \$2.50 fee per flight, or \$5 if the trip includes more than one connecting flight.

The Department of Transportation's new division, the Transportation Security Administration, will immediately begin criminal background checks on about 750,000 airport employees, including food caterers, maintenance workers and others with access to the planes.

But critics say that even stepped-up background checks won't change a culture of lax security at many airports that allows airport employees or contract workers access to secure areas without being thoroughly screened.

"If you have a secure (employee) entrance, a lot of times you can just wait for someone else to come to the door and follow them in," said Alan Dean, a former associate administrator at the Federal Aviation Administration, now a fellow at the National Academy of Public Administration.

Dean said the Department of Transportation will have to look at adding more security at employee checkpoints. "Having more of a presence by federal people will be a big help," he said.

The bill signed by the president includes money for a pilot program at 20 airports to begin testing new technologies, such as biometric devices like retinal scanners and ID cards that recognize fingerprints. Critics say the technology is expensive and may take years to develop fully, but supporters see it as the best way to ensure that terrorists don't get on or near planes.

"We can't afford not to go for it," said U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, a San Jose Democrat and member of the House Transportation Committee who pushed for the pilot program. "Everybody is really tentative about traveling now. If we can get people back to the confidence levels prior to Sept. 11, things will start to pick up again."

THE CHANGES AHEAD

-- Short Term

- Federal managers at airport security points.
 - Criminal background checks on about 750,000 airport employees.
 - More law enforcement officers at airports, including one at every screening station at larger airports.
 - A \$2.50-per-flight fee to help pay for security costs (within 60 days).
 - Screening of all checked baggage (within 60 days).
 - More air marshals on flights.
 - More reinforcement of cockpit doors.
 - Prescreening of more passengers, plus more cross-checking with FBI and other watch lists for suspicious passengers. . -- Longer Term
 - A new Transportation Department agency to oversee all transportation security matters.
 - Within one year all 28,000 airport baggage screeners to be federal workers. All airports, except for five pilot programs, to be under the federal system for three years, after which they can switch to other security systems.
 - By the end of 2002 all checked baggage to be inspected with explosives detection machines.
 - Trusted passenger programs using new technologies to identify passengers and expedite screening.
- . Source: Associated Press

Chronicle political writer Carla Marinucci contributed to this report. / E-mail Zachary Coile at zcoile@sfgchronicle.com.

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